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Henry March Gilbert 1846-1931: ‘Staunch Liberal and Nonconformist’

### Introduction

In his article covering five generations of the Gilbert family A.G.K. Leonard concentrated on their bookselling business (see Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> Adopting such a broad brush approach, the author devoted relatively little attention to individual family members, one of the most interesting of whom is Henry March Gilbert. His career straddled the late Victorian era and the first three decades of the twentieth century. He was the son of the founder of the business and responsible for opening a second shop in Winchester in 1895. As Leonard mentions, Henry also ‘made time to play a full part in public and religious affairs, as a staunch Liberal and Nonconformist.’<sup>2</sup> In what follows, it is these aspects of Henry’s life to which particular attention is given.



Figure 1: Gilbert’s Bookshop in Above Bar Southampton

Source: Adrian Rance, *A Victorian Photographer in Southampton: Thomas Hibberd James* (Southampton: Paul Cave, 1980), p.9.

To set the scene, what can be learnt about Henry’s life and career from census returns and similar sources? He was born in 1846, when his parents were residents of Halstead in Essex. This was still their home in 1851. By 1861 they had moved to Bernard Street in Southampton, where Henry was living with his widowed father and three sisters. In 1867 Henry married Mary Emma Stanesby who was the same age and had been born in Chelsea. Not surprisingly, perhaps, her father was a stationer and

bookseller. The marriage was registered in Westminster. At the time of the 1871 census, Henry and Mary were recorded as living in Bernard Street. By 1881, however, they had moved to Wandsworth. At some point they returned to Southampton, since the 1891 census return shows them as occupying a property named “Hailstede” in Archer’s Road. In addition to Henry and Mary, the household consisted of four daughters, a governess, two apprentice booksellers who were designated ‘boarders’ and a general domestic servant.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, they were relatively well off.

In 1896 the family moved to Winchester and by 1901 Henry and Mary had set up home at 1 Grafton Road with two of their daughters, one son and a housekeeper. A visitor, William Parkhouse, was staying with them on census night. He had a jewellery and watch making business in Southampton and was also a Nonconformist and a leading member of Avenue Congregational Church. Ten years later, the family was still living in Grafton Road, the property having been named “Hamilton House”. Following Mary’s death in early 1918, a few months later Henry married Mabel Ann Read.<sup>4</sup> They continued living in “Hamilton House” until his death in January 1931.



Figure 2: Henry March Gilbert

Source: A.G.K Leonard, *Images of England. Southampton: the second selection* (Stroud: Tempus, 2002), p.36.

## Political Activities

It is not certain when Henry's political career began, but in 1872, at the age of 26, he stood successfully for Southampton Borough Council. He was one of the Liberal candidates for the four seats in All Saints Ward (see Table 1). This election generated considerable interest since it was the first held under the provisions of the Ballot Act 1872 which had introduced the principle of a secret ballot.

Table 1: Result of Election for All Saints Ward held on 1st November 1872<sup>5</sup>

Candidate	Party	Votes	Elected/Not elected
J.R. Weston	Lib	428	Elected
W.A. Kilby	Lib	329	Elected
J. Bailey	Lib	285	Elected
H.M. Gilbert	Lib	280	Elected
G.P. Perkins	Con	242	Not elected
A.J. Aslatt	n.d.	191	Not elected
G.T. Pope	n.d.	164	Not elected
T.A. Skelton <sup>1</sup>	n.d.	79	Not elected
A.L. McCalmont <sup>1</sup>	n.d.	38	Not elected

Note

1. It was 'publicly announced that ... [these two candidates] had not consented to their nomination and would not serve if elected.'

n.d. = not designated

With the formation of the Southampton Liberal Association in 1874 Henry was appointed Secretary and worked closely with the president Edwin Jones. He suffered a setback in 1875, however, when he failed to secure re-election to the Borough Council (see Table 2). On this occasion, the Conservatives vigorously contested All Saints Ward holding many public meetings. According to the Conservative supporting *Hampshire Advertiser* the Liberal campaign was somewhat lacklustre.

Table 2: Result of Election for All Saints Ward held on 2nd November 1875<sup>6</sup>

Candidate	Party	Votes	Elected/Not elected
W. Furber	Con	821	Elected
William H. Davis	Con	715	Elected
William Perkins	Con	696	Elected
Phillip Warren	Con	670	Elected
Dr Aldridge	Lib	518	Not elected
H.M. Gilbert*	Lib	482	Not elected
H.E. Robins	Lib	414	Not elected
E.R.V. Shuttle	Lib	373	Not elected

Note

\* = sitting councillor seeking re-election

After an interval of 14 years Henry returned to the council in 1889 as an alderman, having been nominated for the post by the redoubtable James Lemon. Some idea of his interests can be gained from the fact that during the municipal year 1893-4 he

served on the Baths Committee, of which he was Deputy Chairman; and the Borough Boundaries, Free Libraries, Technical Instruction and Town Antiquities Committees. He remained an alderman until 1897 when he resigned following his move to Winchester, with the council members passing a resolution recording ‘their appreciation of Mr Gilbert’s services and their regret at his resignation.’<sup>7</sup>

For Henry the appeal of local politics continued and in 1904, after some hesitation, he agreed to stand for one of the two seats in Winchester’s St John Ward. His reasons for doing were set out in an election notice which he and a second candidate, Charles Godwin, placed in the *Hampshire Chronicle*:

We have been requested by the Winchester Ratepayers’ Association and by many influential inhabitants, to come forward as candidates for the seats ... [if elected] our purpose will be to safeguard the interests of the Ratepayers, and to oppose all extravagant and useless expenditure; at the same time we shall be prepared to vote for all such measures as are best calculated to promote the interests and requirements of the city.<sup>8</sup>

At a subsequent election meeting, he made clear that he was not opposed to public spending as such but simply that which he did not consider represented ‘value for money.’ For example: ‘He believed in having proper [swimming] baths but he did not believe in providing baths in an extravagant way.’ Like the baths in Southampton, they should pay ‘their working expenses.’<sup>9</sup> These arguments must have resonated with the electorate because, on a turnout of 64.3 per cent, he and Godwin trounced the two sitting members who were seeking re-election (see Table 3).

Table 3: Result of Election for St John Ward held on 1st November 1904<sup>10</sup>

Candidate	Designation	Votes	Elected/Not elected
Charles E. Godwin	Solicitor	481	Elected
Henry M. Gilbert	Bookseller	431	Elected
Harry Easther*	Gentleman	164	Not Elected
Charles Salter*	Licensed victualler	108	Not Elected

Note

\* sitting councillor seeking re-election

Again his interests were reflected in the committees on which he served. Initially, they were Museum and Library, Recreation Ground, Education and General Purposes.<sup>11</sup> In 1907 Henry was returned unopposed.<sup>12</sup> By now he was just a member of the Museum and Library and General Purposes Committees. However, he was prepared to make his views known on other subjects and from these some insights into his values and beliefs can be gleaned. For example, at the council meeting in August 1910, he raised concerns regarding the housing conditions of some of the poorest residents of Winchester:

... it was a common practice to find more than one family living in the same cottage. That was bad, and the Council should try to remedy it. While he did not agree altogether with the municipalities providing dwellings – because the Local Government Board being so very stringent in regard to their requirements that it made the building very expensive for the person who

was to occupy those premises – still it had to be done, rather than the overcrowding that was reported should be allowed to continue. By that the physical and moral health of the population was so much at stake that ... if private enterprise did not provide suitable dwellings it was laid on the Council that they should do their part, even if it did entail a little loss.<sup>13</sup>

In other words, questions of morality should take precedence even over those of finance. A few months later, at the end of his term of office, Henry ‘felt obliged to retire owing to the demands of his private business.’<sup>14</sup>

Henry had been appointed a city magistrate in 1907 and continued in this capacity until his death. Described in his obituary as ‘a man of excellent judgment, and imbued with common sense’, he was seen as being well suited for service on the magistrates bench. The same qualities were also deemed to have been of great value in the council chambers of Southampton and Winchester. Although allowance has to be made for the use of over-exuberant and eulogistic language on these occasions, a further indication of what motivated him can be gained from the following tribute:

He had a large heart, and was full of kindly sympathy for the broken, the destitute, the infirm, and those who had been worsted in the battle of life. He was a great lover of children ...<sup>15</sup>

Through his involvement in public affairs, he was, in many respects, an exemplar of what was known as ‘political Nonconformity.’ This embraced the notion of the ‘social gospel’ whereby Christians, inspired by their faith, sought to address problems within society through a combination of philanthropic and collective endeavour.

### Congregational Activist

As mentioned earlier, Henry was a committed Nonconformist. According to Leonard, while he was living in Southampton he was ‘strongly identified with Portland Baptist and The Avenue Congregational Churches.’<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Henry was one of the founding members of Avenue, when it was established in 1892, having previously been attached to Albion Congregational Church in St Mary’s Street. It is not known why he transferred his allegiance from the Baptists to the Congregationalists, but having done so he remained loyal to Congregationalism for the remainder of his life. Apart from the issue of adult or believers’ baptism there were, in fact, very few doctrinal differences between the two denominations.

Following his move to Winchester, he transferred to Jewry Street Congregational Church and ‘threw himself heart and soul into the place’ (see Figure 3).<sup>17</sup> Within a few months he was elected to the diaconate and in this capacity was soon embroiled in a dispute between the deacons and the minister, Charles Dickinson, the cause of which appears to have been certain aspects of the manner in which the latter conducted services. As Ruth Godden records, ‘the internal life ... [of the Church] was difficult during the last years of the nineteenth century, with dissension between minister and deacons, and bitterness marking the resignation of ... Dickinson in 1899.’<sup>18</sup> At one point during the controversy all the deacons, including Henry, resigned. However, after the matters of contention had been resolved, they took up their posts again.





Figure 3: Jewry Street Congregational Church in Winchester

Notwithstanding these difficulties, Henry remained resolute in his faith. At the grass roots level he had ‘a close interest in Sunday School work’ and for well over 50 years he either taught or superintended the work in the churches with which he was associated. He was also a local preacher and ‘preached with acceptance in many pulpits in the county.’<sup>19</sup> Arising from his bookselling interests, it is unsurprising that for a number of years he was President of Jewry Street Literary Society and Social Union.<sup>20</sup> As its title suggests, this promoted the causes of what today would be called ‘personal development’ and ‘lifelong learning.’ Henry remained a deacon until 1927 and then, in recognition of his many and varied services to the Church, was elected an honorary life deacon.

At county level, Henry was heavily involved with the Hampshire Congregational Union (HCU). The high regard in which he was held in Congregational circles was confirmed in 1907 when he was appointed Chairman of the HCU for the following twelve months. Each year a leading figure within the denomination held this post, alternating between clerical and lay. One of the major functions of the Chairman was to preside at the half yearly meetings of the Union held in the spring and autumn.

Since these events received a considerable amount of press coverage they afford traces of Henry's religious interests and preoccupations.

At the 1908 spring gathering held in Fareham his presidential address was entitled "Our Past and Present." In the course of his remarks, he argued that 'Congregationalists had entered into a glorious heritage' and reminded his audience of the sacrifices their forebears had undergone in order to 'hand down to future generations that unspeakable freedom of worship which they enjoyed today.' Reflected in these comments were an undoubted love of history and the anticipation of the 250th anniversary of the Great Ejection of 1662 due in 1912.<sup>21</sup> He went on to contend that there was a need in the present day to prioritise 'their responsibilities as Church members' and to 'believe more in the power of prayer.'<sup>22</sup>

At the autumn gathering, which was held at East Cliff Congregational Church in Bournemouth, the theme of the public meeting which Henry chaired was "Work amongst the Young". He was undoubtedly speaking for most if not all of those present when he maintained that 'he did not think anyone could overrate the importance and necessity of the work that they as a Christian Church had to carry out, earnestly and with diligence, amongst the young.'<sup>23</sup> In his view, it was work to which all church members should be committed in terms of not only sympathy but also practical assistance. While recognising that the work was 'hard and difficult', as he pointed out it was essential for the future well being of the church. As indicated earlier, in this sphere he clearly practised what he preached.

Henry was also ecumenically minded as far as other Nonconformist denominations were concerned and was actively involved with the Federation of Evangelical Free Churches of Hampshire, occupying a variety of offices and serving as President for the year 1898/99. A further example of his commitment to the wider Free Church constituency occurred in 1900, when he conducted a service at the laying of the foundation stone for a new Primitive Methodist church in Chandlers Ford, with Mrs Tankerville Chamberlayne taking the lead in the stone-laying ceremony.<sup>24</sup>

At Henry's funeral service in 1931 the minister of Jewry Street, Richard Sirhowy Jones referred to him as being 'a deeply religious man, not flagrantly obtrusive of his religious profession, but he was not ashamed of his religion; he did not hide his light.' He had been 'a leading member of Winchester Congregational Church for more than half a century, and had held office as Church Secretary, Treasurer and Trustee.'<sup>25</sup> In the Church minutes it was recorded that 'every institution of the Church found in him a real friend and generous helper, for he always had at heart the best interests of the Church.'<sup>26</sup>

## Conclusion

With his dual commitment to Liberalism and Nonconformity, Henry Gilbert personified one of the distinguishing traits of the period in which he lived. As David Bebbington puts it, by the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth 'the leading men in the chapels were commonly leading men in the affairs of the localities too.'<sup>27</sup> Likewise, Alan Argent observes that: 'Those in the forefront of chapel life often were active in their communities – as mayors, councillors, members of school boards and as Liberal party members.'<sup>28</sup> As has been shown, in addition to being a prominent local businessman, Henry was for many years a diligent public servant. At the same time he had a strong faith, which served to inspire and sustain him, and motivated him to promote causes, such as religious education, in which he had a passionate interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> A.G.K. Leonard, "Gilberts ... Booksellers through Five Generations", *The Journal of the Southampton Local History Forum*, no 11, Winter 2003, pp.13-5.
- <sup>2</sup> Leonard, "Gilberts", p.14.
- <sup>3</sup> According to the 1911 census, Henry and Mary had eight children, two of whom died in infancy.
- <sup>4</sup> In the 1911 census returns Mabel is shown as living with her parents in Colebrook Street. Her occupation was recorded as that of 'draper'. At the time she was 36 years old.
- <sup>5</sup> *Hampshire Advertiser*, November 2, 1872, p.4. The occupations of Henry's fellow Liberals were given as Weston, auctioneer; Kilby, solicitor; and Bailey, builder.
- <sup>6</sup> *Hampshire Advertiser*, November 3, 1875, p.2.
- <sup>7</sup> County Borough of Southampton Minutes & Proceedings of Council and Committees, 1896-7.
- <sup>8</sup> *Hampshire Chronicle*, October 29, 1904, p.1.
- <sup>9</sup> *Hampshire Chronicle*, October 29, 1904, p.6.
- <sup>10</sup> *Hampshire Chronicle*, November 5, 1904, p.10.
- <sup>11</sup> City of Winchester Council Agenda and Minutes of Council and Committee Meetings, November 1904 to November 1905. Hampshire Record Office, Ref W/B3/41.
- <sup>12</sup> *Hampshire Chronicle*, October 16, 1907, p.7.
- <sup>13</sup> *Hampshire Chronicle*, August 6, 1910, p.3.
- <sup>14</sup> *Hampshire Chronicle*, November 5, 1910, p.7.
- <sup>15</sup> *Hampshire Chronicle*, January 31, 1931, p.5.
- <sup>16</sup> Leonard, "Gilberts", p.14.
- <sup>17</sup> *Hampshire Chronicle*, January 31, 1931, p.5. His transfer and that of his wife were minuted on December 2, 1896, when 'they were cordially and unanimously received as members'. Winchester Congregational Church Meeting Minute Book, 1886-1906. Hampshire Record Office, Ref 65M77/5, pp.160-1.
- <sup>18</sup> Ruth Godden, "The Women of Winchester's Chapels 1851-1901'," (MA diss., University of Winchester, 2007), pp.72-3.
- <sup>19</sup> *Hampshire Chronicle*, January 31, 1931, p.5.
- <sup>20</sup> *Hampshire Chronicle*, January 18, 1913, p.7.
- <sup>21</sup> For a discussion of these celebrations, see Rosalind Johnson and Roger Ottewill, "Memorialising 1662: Hampshire Congregationalists and the 250th Anniversary of the Great Ejection", in Peter Clarke and Charlotte Methuen (eds), *Studies in Church History 49, The Church on its Past* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2013), pp.236-47. Most Congregationalists associated the foundation of their denomination with the Great Ejection.
- <sup>22</sup> *Hampshire Post*, May 1, 1908.
- <sup>23</sup> *Bournemouth Guardian*, October 3, 1908, p.6.
- <sup>24</sup> *Hampshire Advertiser*, August 18, 1900, p.8.
- <sup>25</sup> *Hampshire Chronicle*, January 31, 1931, p.5.
- <sup>26</sup> Winchester Congregational Church Meeting Minute Book, 1906-33. Hampshire Record Office, Ref 65M77/6, p.489.
- <sup>27</sup> David Bebbington, *The Nonconformist Conscience* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982), p.153.
- <sup>28</sup> Alan Argent, *The Transformation of Congregationalism 1900-2000* (Nottingham: Congregational Federation, 2013), p.38.